

The Absolute Origin, the Language of “Creator,” and the Buddhist Communication Strategy:

A Sociology of Knowledge Reading of Early Texts**

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Human civilizations have always attempted to articulate the origin of reality, each within the limitations and possibilities of its own cultural language. Every society interprets existence through conceptual tools shaped by ecology, social organization, and intellectual background. In Semitic cultures, the divine appears explicit, direct, and sovereign. In the forests and ritual world of early India, metaphysical inquiry flourished through the Vedic atmosphere and Brahmanical cosmology. In ancient China, the primordial source manifested as an impersonal Dao. These differences do not negate a universal intuition regarding an absolute ground of reality; they simply show that each civilization expresses this intuition through its own anthropological lens.

During the 5th century BCE, the Buddha lived amid a Brahmanical worldview that personified cosmic order through the figure of Brahṃā, often regarded as a creator. Yet early Buddhist texts reveal that the Buddha adopted a carefully nuanced communication strategy. His rejection of a *creator* was not a rejection of an absolute, unconditioned origin. Rather, it was a critique of identifying Brahṃā—a celestial being subject to birth, conditions, ignorance, and temporal limitation—with the ultimate ground of existence. A being that is born cannot be the source of all that is born.

One of the clearest Buddhist statements regarding an absolute ground appears in *Udāna* 8.3, which speaks of “the unborn, the unbecome, the unmade, the unconditioned” (*ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhatam*). This passage is frequently misinterpreted when forced into the categories of theistic versus non-theistic thought. In truth, it indicates that Buddhism acknowledges a dimension free from origination, change, and decay. Without this unborn element, the Buddha states, liberation from the born, the become, the made, and the conditioned would be impossible. In other words, conditioned existence presupposes an unconditioned ground; the realm of arising cannot stand without something that does not arise.

This understanding also aligns with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). While dependent origination describes how phenomena arise due to conditions, it does not claim to identify a genealogical first cause. It explains a pattern, not a temporal genesis. In this context, *Udāna* 8.3 provides the ontological horizon that makes freedom from conditionality possible. Without an unconditioned element, the cycle of conditioned emergence could never be transcended.

However, in ancient India, any explicit reference to an “absolute origin” risked being interpreted as an affirmation of a supreme deity. The Brahmanical system already maintained a highly structured theology, ready to identify any absolute with Brahṃā. Had the Buddha explicitly described the unconditioned as a “Creator,” it would have been instantly assimilated into the existing theistic framework. Rejecting Brahṃā directly would have caused social and religious friction. Thus, the Buddha adopted a philosophical, rather than mythological, discourse: affirming the necessity of an unconditioned ground while avoiding language that could be reified into a divine person.

This is where the sociology of knowledge becomes helpful. Cultural expressions of origin are shaped by the society’s ecological, social, and cosmological environment. Semitic desert cultures imagined the Absolute as a personal, commanding, transcendent deity. Indian cultures shaped by forests, elaborate rituals, and contemplative speculation used metaphysical language centered on necessity, consciousness, and cyclical cosmos. Chinese traditions articulated the source of reality as an

impersonal, spontaneous process. What appears as doctrinal disagreement is often a difference in cultural vocabulary. All ultimately point to a reality unconditioned, unbegotten, and unmade.

In the Greek tradition, Plotinus described *The One* as a source from which all existence emanates like light from the sun, without willful action. In early China, the Dao is the nameless, formless beginning from which all things arise without intention. In the Upanishads, Brahman is the non-personal ground underlying all existence. None of these traditions imagined the origin of reality as a craftsman molding clay or a deity summoning matter into being. Creation is not an act of mechanical production but a relation between the absolute and the manifest world—whether described as emanation, manifestation, unfolding, or appearance.

Within this broader intellectual landscape, Buddhism does not stand outside the idea of an ultimate ground. Its unique contribution lies in its terminology. When the Buddha spoke of the *asaṅkhata dhātu*, “the unconditioned element,” he referred to a reality without beginning, without form, without dependence, and irreducible to any phenomenon. This reality makes possible the emergence of all conditioned things. The unborn is not merely the opposite of the born; it is the foundation that renders the born intelligible.

From a sociological perspective, the Buddha’s rejection of a “creator” therefore should not be equated with a denial of an absolute ground. Rather, it was a critique directed at the Brahmanical tendency to elevate a conditioned deity into an unconditioned source. The Buddha did not deny that existence points to an absolute; he denied the misidentification of that absolute with a temporal being.

Buddhist texts frequently portray Brahmā as mistakenly believing himself to be the creator, as in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* and *Aggañña Sutta*. These accounts serve as critiques of metaphysical error rather than attacks on the idea of ultimate origin. They expose the logical impossibility of equating a finite being with the infinite ground of all phenomena.

Seen through this lens, the Buddha undertook a process of demythologization: separating the unconditioned from anthropomorphic imagery without negating the metaphysical necessity of the unconditioned itself. The Buddhist notion of *Nibbāna*—the unconditioned, unmade, unborn—functions as this ontological horizon. In such a framework, “creator” is not an inherently erroneous term; it is a culturally shaped expression referring to the unconditioned foundation of conditioned existence, though Buddhism avoids personifying it.

In conclusion, early Buddhist texts do not deny an absolute origin. They deny the equation of that origin with any celestial being. By describing the “unborn, unmade, unconditioned,” the Buddha affirmed the existence of a foundational reality. Yet due to the socioreligious milieu of ancient India—which would easily conflate such a reality with Brahmā—the Buddha refrained from calling it a creator. The concept of “creator” becomes, in this sense, a cultural metaphor: a label shaped by anthropological context, pointing to the same metaphysical intuition recognized across civilizations—that the unoriginated makes possible all that is originated.

Key References

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